

It's for you: the call centre diploma

A new telephone skills course is being piloted by Chelsea Building Society, reports **Andrew Cave**

FED UP of waiting for hours listening to canned Muzak at call centres only to find an automaton who can't deal with your query? Well relax, or maybe don't, because if Simon Bell has his way your call centre operator may soon be more qualified than you.

Bell, who runs a Dorset-based training consultancy called Direct Sales Accreditation (DSA), claims to have come up with "the Holy Grail of call centre selling" after 20 years in the sales and training industries.

He has incorporated this into a diploma in advanced telephone skills that offers a "formula for enjoyable, manageable and sustainable selling" and is being piloted by Chelsea Building Society.

While there are plenty of on-the-job training schemes for call centre staff, Bell says DSA's is different because it has been approved by the Newcastle-based NCFE, Britain's seventh-largest national awarding body, as a level five award - just one level down from an honours degree.

Although the course does not offer a National Vocational Qualification, Bell says its qualification is "directly comparable" to a level-5 NVQ, "because it combines 30 hours of tutorial with 350 hours of desk-based, practical learning".

The course takes place in five modules over five months. Each module includes a day of formalised training, with the remainder of the training taking place at work - logged and monitored by a process that takes up to 15 minutes at the end of each day and requires people on the course to record their day's call experiences.

With 586,000 people working in UK call centres - a number that is expected to rise to 677,000 by 2012 - Bell



Training consultancy DSA aims to move call centre staff on from 'quasi-adversarial, egocentric, product-focused selling'

says it's an important industry that has long been neglected by professional qualification providers.

DSA's diploma aims to help fill that gap, he says. It also dovetails with the call by John Denham, the Innovation, Universities and Skills Secretary, for companies to pay close attention to the Leitch Report, which urges the adoption of high levels of

workforce qualifications by 2020, just so that Britain can "run to stand still" against its competitors.

The five modules start with personal psychology, getting call centre staff to consider both the traditional relationship of the telephone marketer with colleagues and customers and what could be achieved with a more conversational and personal approach.

Secondly, the course teaches staff about customer psychology, helping them to consider how to pitch effectively and trigger instant and continued engagement with the potential customer by learning to spot and understand a customer's mind set.

Unit three deals with building a rapport with customers, guiding staff to

consider how to connect with customers in a way that leads to enjoyable, sustainable and manageable interaction with them.

The remaining two modules deal with managing the interaction with customers and how to deliver lasting benefits from their calls.

Included in the training are what Bell calls "Five Rules of Business Rapport",

which he says are easy rules for telephone agents that help them strike a rapport with customers in less than 60 seconds.

"The first rule is to be prepared to see what happens," he says, acknowledging that many call centre staff go straight on to a strictly controlled script as soon as they answer the phone.

"The other rules are to identify what the customer wants to hear, to expect no more than business rapport and to recognise that telephone agents, customers and employers have the same motivation.

"The last rule is always to be asking what the customer wants and needs."

Bell says what can result is a switch from the old days of "quasi-adversarial, egocentric, product-focused or service-focused selling to a collaborative, relationship-based, solution-focused approach which consumers appreciate".

Mark Higgins, head of people development at Chelsea Building Society - which has seven contact centre staff and three branch-based employees one month into the course - says he is encouraged with what he has seen so far.

"It moves telephone contact centres away from the cold-call selling process to an approach that sees fundamental conversation as the key," he says.

"A conversation takes place and what's important is that at the end of that call, the customer, the agent and the Chelsea Building Society itself are happy with the outcome.

"We are a company that puts its customers first as we are a mutual and we are always looking to do something different.

"Telephone contact centres are big business and what they do and how they are operated really matter."